

Two weeks passed on the calendar since the tax return and six months passed since the last cattle loaded on the trucks up on the Divide. Do those numbers make any sense? Look at it like this: Last summer, 106-degree temperature was "cashing out climate"; two weeks ago was "paying Ol' Uncle on the sales."

If you could see my tax return, it'd be easier to explain. More than half of the sales information can be linked to the ages. Given time, a pretty close account can be revived of the years the cows were calves or first-calf heifers.

Pretty safe to make such a claim because other than the hands who helped and a partner who filled in on holidays and weekends, there was nothing earth-shaking about an old herder selling a 400-head herd of Angus cows before they have recovered from calf weaning. (I mean the cows recovered, not the herder.)

You may have had to hear this same song before, last year at the shipping pens or over the wire from your grandpa or dad. "I ain't gonna' go through seven years of drouth like we did in the 1950s. Don't give a gawd-a-mighty damn if I do have to pay tax on the sale of my nubbin. Not

gonna' catch me in another holocaust like that sapsucker in 1950."

It's hard to stage that kind of drama without a coffee shop stool to turn partway around and back again or an old pickup window to expectorate from.

Back in the early lives of these tales written articles were addressed "Dear Stanley Frank" — simple as that. Readers or subscribers don't come up that far from town on a ranch. Once in a great while, an ol' boy sailing down Highway 67 might have waved at us driving sheep or cattle but I never thought whether he read my stuff.

Days and weeks passed on that ranch with Spanish the principal language and horseback a strong contender for principal transportation. Five mules pulled two double rigs and one single wagon to feed all the country, except for a pickup, on and across Highway 67, to avoid the green-shirted Border Patrol.

You can probably appreciate how the stories originated from pastures, pens and bunkhouses. Keep in mind, too, that all the editors of this newspaper have been ranch experienced or exposed. Two, in fact, were tempered by the hardest-working boss to ever saddle a horse in the shortgrass country, Cal Johnson. (Students' names omitted on purpose.)

But from last summer, the setting became apparent that the sellout might as well be a secret. Sure, the grown kids cared. One girl sure cared after the sell-off netted her a sorrel horse to ride on her place.

Lonely became the theme the day the horses moved from up on the Divide down to the line camp on the highway. Before dark, the pens up at the barn would have made a visit over at Stu Evans' cemetery hill a social event.

What was a rain crow or a whippoorwill began a cry so mournful, I removed my hearing aids at first and then put them back in on fidelity so high that the calls blurred. Without turning up my bed, turning off the water on the pecan trees or unplugging the computer, I backed across the cattleguard to the front yard 50 steps away and drove off to this Mertzon house.

A 1983 half-ton pickup full of propane with the keys in the ignition was left in the garage for neighbors' breakdowns, or grandkids to practice driver's education. Twelve or 15, 36-inch wide shelves of books remained for grandkids and busybody parents to stare at and exclaim: "Wonder what Grandpa is going to do with these old books?" Whether that ol' grandpa is around won't be hard to pull up: "He will be busy minding his own business and looking after his own books."

The accountant advised against the drouth deferment on the cattle. He objected because the weather might not break before the deferment expired. After you keep books for herders, you hear so much about the weather you learn to give weather forecasts along with tax strategy.

When you go through the return on such a big liquidation, it makes you wonder what you are going to put down the next tax year. The saddle horses are old enough that they spill more oats than they eat. The deer hunters spend so much time in camp, you worry that wives or girlfriends might have other projects for them.

Every Monday, I swear I am going back on the Divide to work at my ranch house. But once there, the stillness is too much to bear.